

Investigation: Transit Tracks

Students will be able to

- describe a transit and the conditions when a transit may be seen
- describe how a planet's size and distance from its star affects the behavior of transits
- interpret graphs of brightness vs time to deduce information about planet-star systems.

A. What is a transit?

1. Introduce students to the concept of transits by reading a short account of the first transit observation by Jeremiah Horrocks (<http://kepler.nasa.gov/ed/lc/horrocks.html>)

2. Demonstrate a transit by positioning the clip-on lamp at a height between standing eye-level and seated eye-level. Swing the largest bead on a thread in a circle around the lamp, with the lamp at the center in the plane of the orbit. Tell the class that the light bulb represents a star and the bead a planet; the planet is orbiting its star, like the Earth or Venus orbit the Sun.

- a. With students seated, ask if anyone can see the bead go directly in front of the star. If the lamp is high enough, none of the students will be able to see the bead go directly in front of the star.
- b. Ask students to move to where they can see the bead go directly in front of the star—it's OK to stand or crouch. After a show of hands indicates everyone can see that event, confirm that is what we mean by a transit—an event where one body crosses in front of another, like when a planet goes in front of a star.

B. How does a planet's size and orbit affect the transit?

To see how planet's diameter and orbit affect transits, orbit the other beads around the light. Make those with shorter strings go in smaller radius orbits with shorter period. Define "period" as the time for one orbit. Ask the students what's different about the planets. They should identify: size, color, period, distance from the star. Ask them if there is any relationship between the planet's period and how far it is from the light. They should notice that the farther it is from the light, the longer the period.

Materials and Preparation

- Clip-on lamp with frosted spherically shaped low wattage (25 W maximum) bulb.
- 4 beads, various sizes (3-12mm) and colors on threads of various lengths (20-100cm). For best results, use black thread.
- "Transit Light Curves" - one set per group of 2-5 students
- Worksheets: 1 per student or 1 per group
- Account of Jeremiah Horrocks observations of the transit of Venus from <http://kepler.nasa.gov/ed/lc>
- Optional: light sensor and computer with sensor interface and graphing function.

C. Interpreting Transit Graphs

1. Imagine a light sensor. Have students imagine they have a light sensor to measure the brightness of the star (light bulb). Move a large opaque object (e.g. a book or cardboard) in front of the star so that its light is completely blocked for all the students. Ask, "If we plotted a graph of brightness vs time—with brightness measured by our light sensor—and this [book] transited the star for 3 seconds, what would the graph look like?" Have volunteers come up and draw their ideas on the board and discuss with the class. We would expect the graph to look like the one shown in Fig. 1: a drop in brightness to 100% blocked.

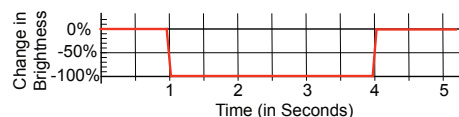


Figure 1. Light curve for a book passing in front of a light.

2. Graph for an orbiting planet. Ask the students, "What would a graph of sensor data look like for the orbiting planet, if we plotted brightness vs time?" Have volunteers draw their ideas on the board, and discuss with class. If their comments do not encompass the idea that the dips in brightness would be very narrow and that their depth would depend on the size of the beads/planets, ask them questions about how wide and deep the dips should be. We would expect the graph to look like the one shown in Fig. 2: horizontal line with dips in brightness to X% blocked.

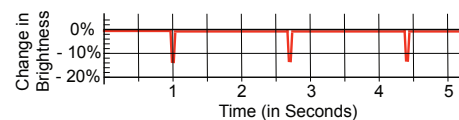


Figure 2. Light curve for a bead orbiting a light.

3. What the graphs reveal. Explain that with transit data, it's possible to calculate a planet's diameter and distance from its star. Ask, "Why do you think those two properties, planet diameter and distance from star, might be important?"

4. Analyze light curves. Hand out a set of sample graphs of Transit Light Curves to each group of 2-5 students and have them interpret the graphs.

5. Discussion questions:

How big is the planet compared with the star?

Assuming the star is Sun-like, and that Earth would make at 0.01% drop in brightness of the Sun if it transited, how big is the planet compared with Earth?

What is/are the period(s) of the planet(s)?

How far is the planet from its star?

D. Making Light Curves

1. Students create their own light curves, choosing planet size and orbit radius, and figuring out how to make the period for their graphs.

2. Trade light curves. They then trade graphs with other groups and challenge each other to figure out what kind of planetary system they created.

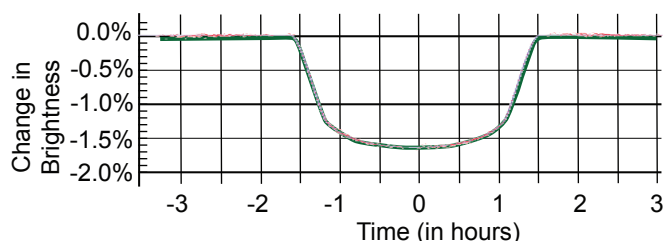
Optional: Collect Real Data

If you have a light sensor, computer with sensor interface, graphing software, and a computer display projector, place the light sensor in the plane of the planet/ bead orbit and aim sensor directly at the light. Collect brightness data and project the computer plot in real time. Let the students comment on what they are observing. Instead of swinging beads, you may use a mechanism, known as an orrery, to model the planets orbiting their star. Instructions for building an orrery from LEGO™ parts may be found on the NASA Kepler Mission website at

<http://kepler.nasa.gov/education/ModelsandSimulations/LegoOrrery/>.

A Note on Shape of Transit Light Curves

A planet takes several hours to transit a star. The "Transit Tracks" light curves are all scaled in "days." The brightness dips appear as "spikes" rather than the "u-shaped" curve that actually results from a transit. On the scale of hours, a typical transit looks like this:



For close-up discovery light curves, follow links from: Kepler.NASA.gov/Mission/discoveries

Guide to pages 3-10.

"Transit Light Curves" Pages 3 and 4 display light curves. Except for the "mystery" light curve on page 3, all curves are based upon real data from the Kepler Mission, HAT-P (Hungarian Automated Telescope network--ground based telescopes), and TrES (Trans-Atlantic Exoplanet Survey--ground based telescopes). The "mystery" light curve includes a planet the size of Earth. As of April 2010, NASA's Kepler Mission scientists had not yet announced the discovery of an Earth. Thus, the "mystery" curve is simulated data. Duplicate one set per group; students can share.

"Analyzing Light Curves" Page 5 is worksheet for recording data that students derive from analyzing the light curves. Duplicate one per student or group.

"Kepler's 3rd Law Graphs" Page 6 has three linear graphs of "Kepler's 3rd Law" scaled for planets with periods of less than 2 years. For comparison, the inner planets of our solar system are marked on the graphs. (For reference, page 9 is a linear plot Kepler's 3rd Law for our solar system including dwarf planet Pluto. Note that the inner planets are all stacked up upon one another.) Students analyze the light curves to determine the period (year-length) for each transiting planet. Using the "Kepler's 3rd Law Graphs," they determine the orbital distance. (Note: For the average distance between the planet and the Sun, Johannes Kepler used the semi-major axis of the ellipse. The semi-major axis is half the major axis, which is the longest distance across the ellipse. Think of it as the longest radius of the ellipse. Kepler's Law states that the period (T, for Time) is proportional to the planet's distance (R) from the Sun. R is the semi-major axis. See page 7 for further information.) Duplicate one set per group; students can share.

"Mathematics for Transit Tracks" Page 7 explains both the graphical and mathematical methods for analyzing the light curves. Page 7 is for the teacher.

"Analyzing Light Curves: Calculated with Kepler's 3rd Law" Page 8 is the student worksheet for light curve analysis using calculations instead of graphical interpretation. Duplicate one per group or student.

Kepler's 3rd Law: Pages 9 and 10 display Kepler's 3rd Law as a linear and log-log graph respectively. These are for reference and can be shown to students to explain why there are three scaled graphs on page 6.

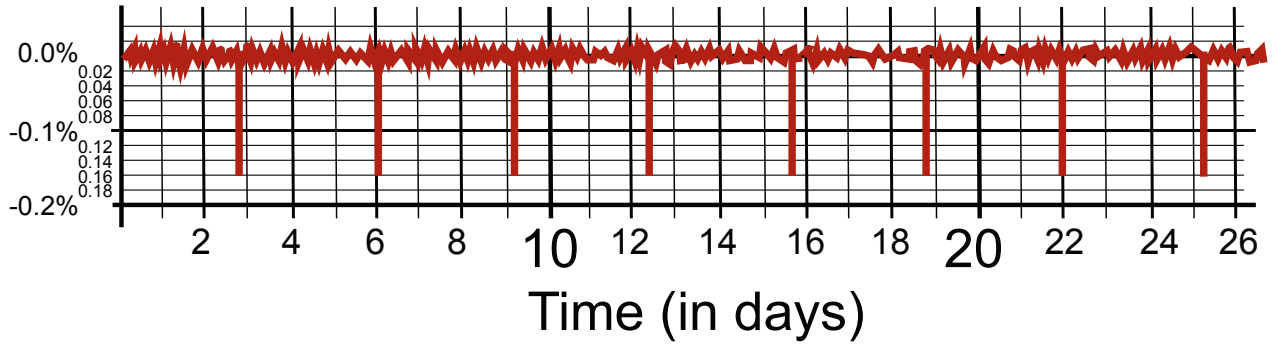
Transit Light Curves

Set 1

p. 3

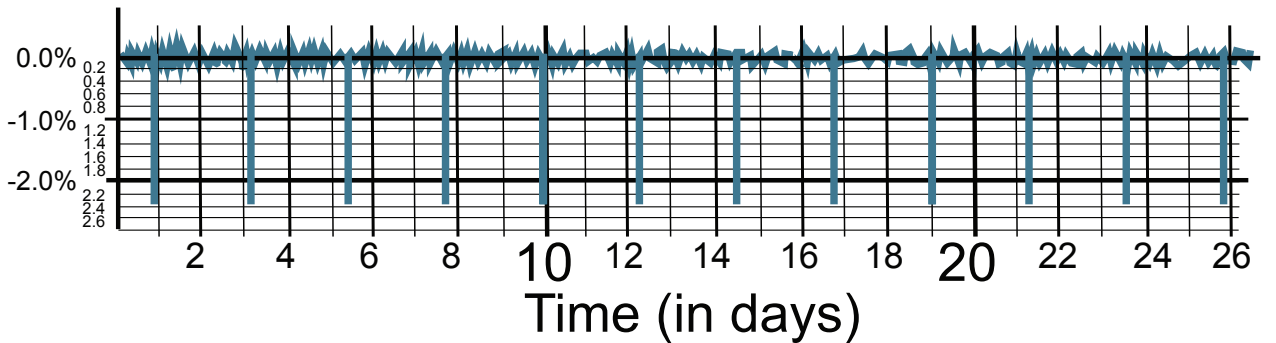
Kepler 4b

Change in
Brightness



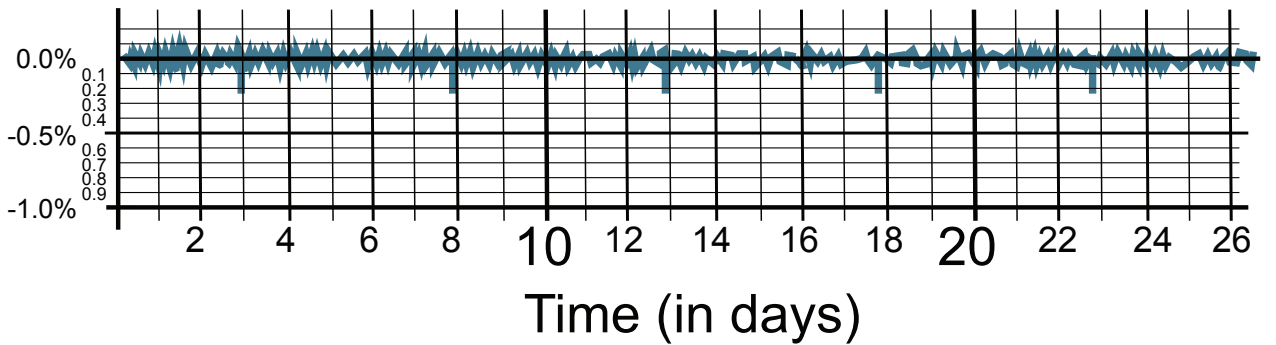
HAT-P-7b

Change in
Brightness



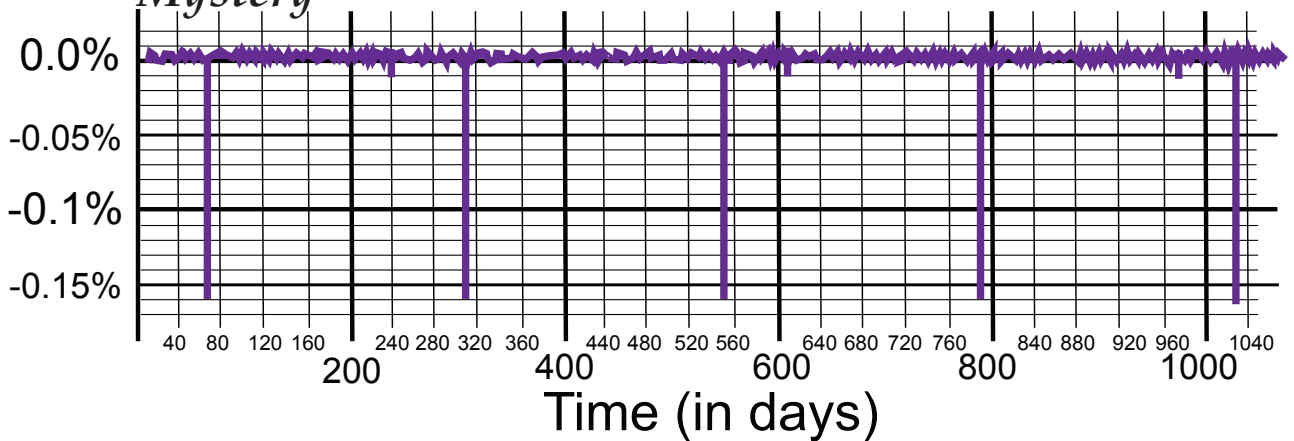
HAT-P-11b

Change in
Brightness



Mystery

Change in
Brightness

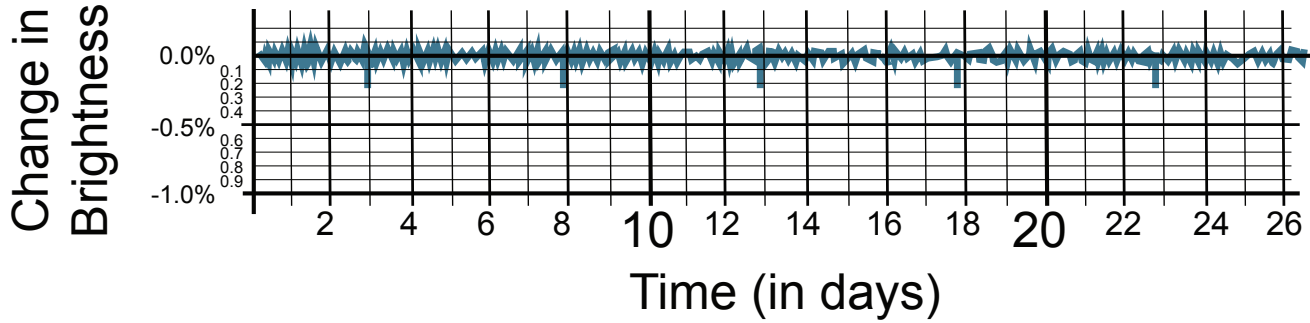


Transit Light Curves

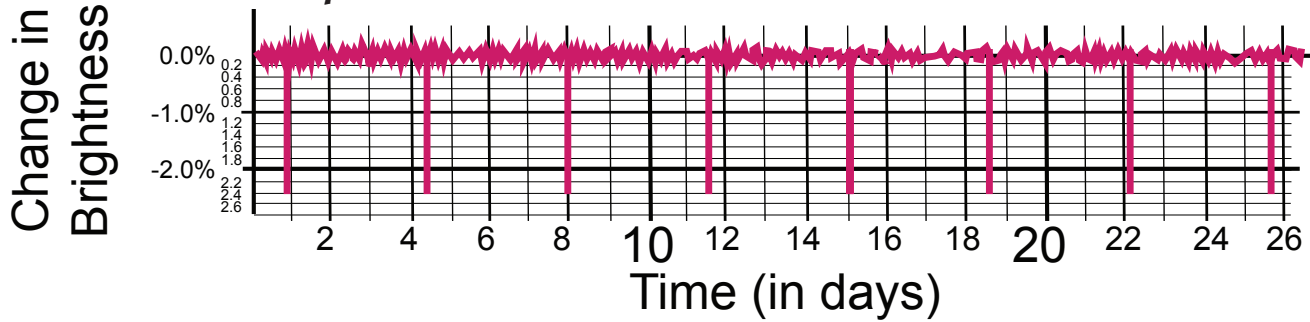
Set 2

p. 4

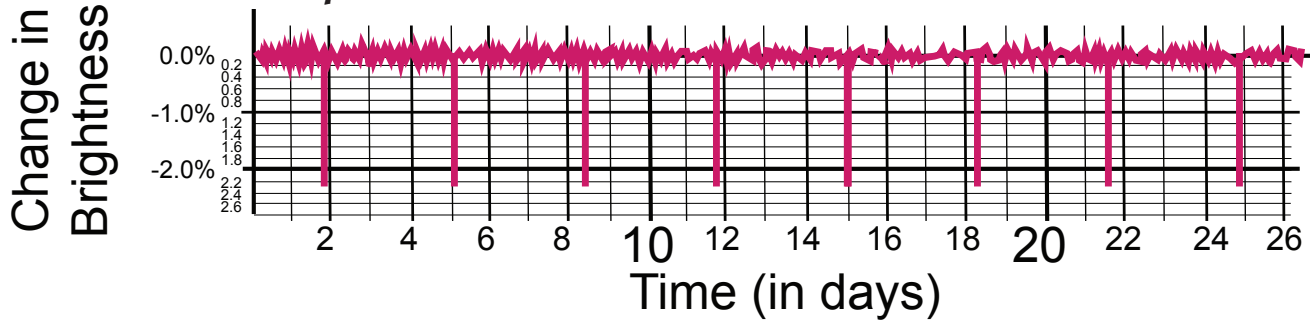
TrES-2b



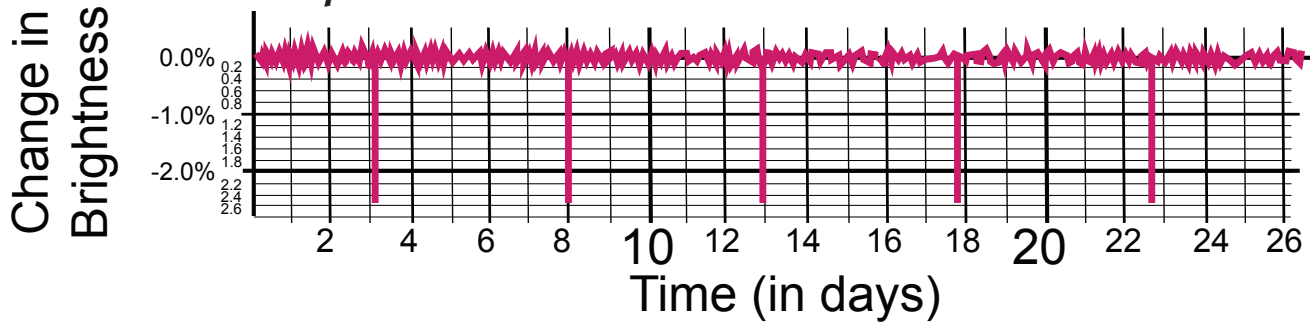
Kepler 5b



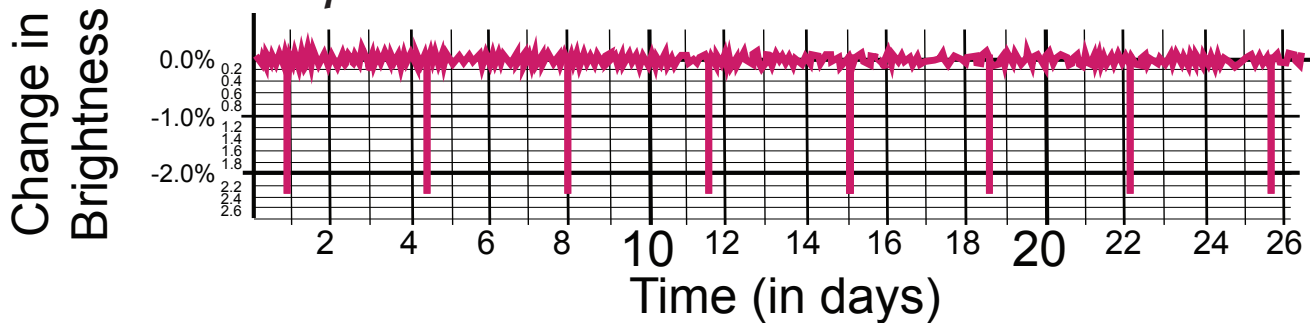
Kepler 6b



Kepler 7b



Kepler 8b



Analyzing Light Curves

Names: _____

Instructions: The “Transit Light Curves” show the light of 9 different stars and how the light level changes when a planet transits each star. Study the light curves to find the period of the planet. (The period equals year-length for a planet, and is the time between transits.) Use “Kepler’s 3rd Law Graphs” to find the “Orbital Distance” of the planet from its parent star. The “Planet’s Size” is found by measuring the “Change in Brightness,” a small percentage drop in the light level as the planet transits. Calculate the planet’s radius using the formula in the table below.

Orbital Distance		
(from Kepler’s 3rd Law graph)		
Planet Name	Period Units _____	Orbital Distance Units _____
Kepler 4b		
HAT-P-7b		
HAT-P-11b		
Mystery-b		
Mystery-c		
Tres-2b		
Kepler 5b		
Kepler 6b		
Kepler 7b		
Kepler 8b		

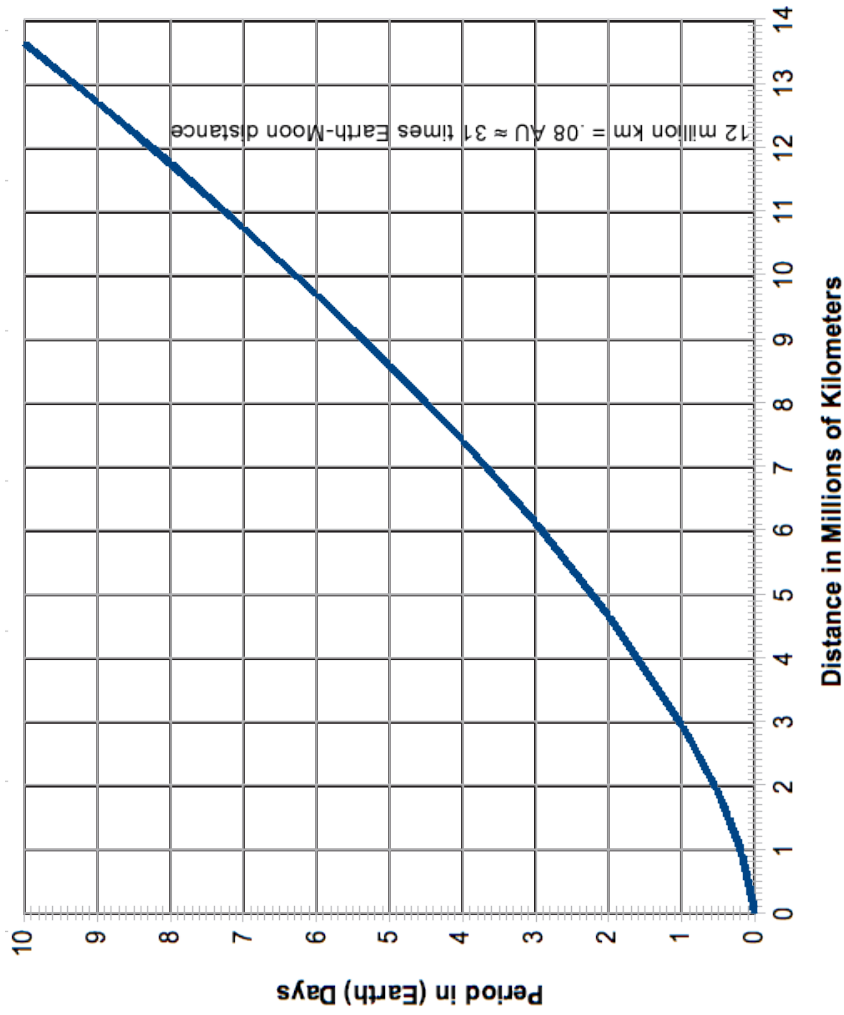
Planet’s Size			
(radius using formula)			
Planet	Brightness Drop of Z (%)	\sqrt{Z}	Radius = $10 \times \sqrt{Z}$ (in Earth radii)
Kepler 4b			
HAT-P-7b			
HAT-P-11b			
Mystery-b			
Mystery-c			
Tres-2b			
Kepler 5b			
Kepler 6b			
Kepler 7b			
Kepler 8b			

Questions:

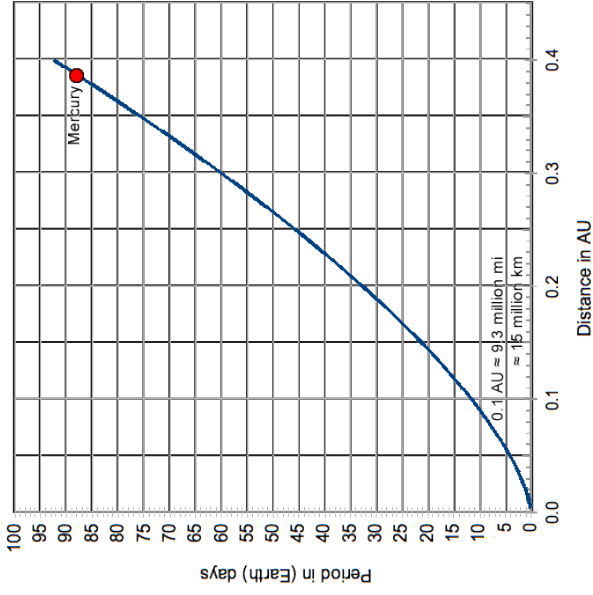
1. Which planet(s) are similar in size to Earth?
2. Jupiter’s radius is about 11 times Earth’s radius. Which planets are similar in size to Jupiter?
3. Describe the relationship between the period of the planets and their orbital distances.

Kepler's 3rd Law Graphs

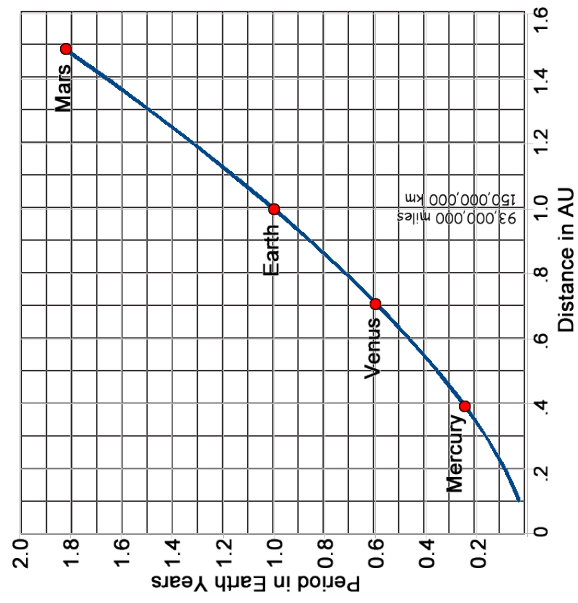
Kepler's 3rd Law Graph for Periods less than 10 days



Kepler's 3rd Law Graph for Periods Less Than 100 Days



Kepler's 3rd Law Graph for the Inner Solar System (periods less than 2 years)



Optional Math for Transit Tracks

To introduce mathematics in the “Tracking Transits” investigation, have the students compute the planet’s size and distance from its star.

PLANET’S DISTANCE FROM ITS STAR

The distance of the planet from the star is the radius (R) of its orbit, if the orbit is a circle with the star at the center. In reality, planet’s orbits are ellipses. For simplicity, we can use the special case ellipse: a circle. Johannes Kepler found that a planet’s orbital radius is related to its period (T), the time it takes to orbit once. The farther out the planet is, the longer it takes to orbit. The relationship is known as Kepler’s 3rd Law. Students can do the Kepler’s 3rd law computation in one of two ways:

Method A: Graphical.

Use the “Kepler’s 3rd Law Graphs” on page 8 to find the distance from the period derived from the light curves. These linear graphs are at different scales because if they are all graphed on the same scale (see page 9), the planet’s distance is hard to interpret for short period orbits. Alternatively, students can use the log-log graph (page 10) to determine orbital distance. Many students find log-log graphs confusing. We recommend using the linear graphs (page 8).

Method B-Computational: Use Kepler’ 3rd Law

For this exercise, we assume that the stars are Sun-like. Like Kepler did, we express the planet’s distance in AU (Astronomical Unit = average distance from Earth to the Sun). Thus, Kepler’s 3rd Law is simply:

$$R^3 = T^2 *$$

$$\text{or } R = \sqrt[3]{T^2}$$

* Note: There is actually a constant K implied in this equation that sets the units straight:

$$R^3/T^2 = K \text{ where } K = 1 \text{ AU}^3/\text{Year}^2$$

For practice, students can calculate the orbital period from the planet’s distance with these results:

$$T = 1 \text{ yr}, 2.83 \text{ yr}, 5.196 \text{ yr}, 0.3535 \text{ yr}$$

$$R = 1 \text{ AU}, 2 \text{ AU}, 3 \text{ AU}, 1/2 \text{ AU}$$

To analyze the Transit Tracks light curves using calculations, use the worksheet “Analyzing Light Curves: Calculated with Kepler’s 3rd Law.” Note: Students will have to convert “days” to “years” to derive the orbital distance.

PLANET SIZE

We assume that the “Transit Tracks” stars are the same size as the Sun. The radius of the planet (r_p) is calculated from the percentage drop in brightness (Z). The radius of the planet (r_p) as compared with the radius of Earth (r_e) is

$$r_p = 10 r_e \times \sqrt{Z}$$

Note, $r_e = 1$.

Do an example and then give some examples to students as exercises: $Z = 25\%, 49\%, 9\%, 16\%, 4\%$

For $Z = 25\%$, $r_p = 50$ Earth radii (a huge planet....)

Note if $Z = 49\%$, it’s not a planet at all, but a companion star in a binary star system.

For more students who finish early, challenge them to derive the formula using algebra. Have them start with the basic idea that drop in brightness is the ratio of the area of the planet (A_p) to the area of the star (A_s):

$$A_p/A_s \times 100 = Z\%$$

They can use the formula for area

$$A = \pi r^2$$

Here are the steps:

$$100 \times \pi r_p^2 / \pi r_s^2 = Z\%$$

$$\text{or } r_p = r_s \times \sqrt{(Z/100)} = r_s \times \sqrt{Z}/10$$

where r_s is the radius of the star.

If the star is about the size of the Sun, then the radius of the star is about 100 times the radius of Earth (r_e) and

$$r_p = 10 r_e \times \sqrt{Z}$$

Two ways to take the cube root of a number:

I. Use the Cube Root table on the worksheet.

II. On a calculator that has ln or log function,

1. Enter X,
2. press the “ln” (or “log”) key,
3. divide by 3,
4. then press “e^x” (or 10^x) key

And you now have the cube root of X.

Note the “e^x” key may require using the “inv” key on the calculator, depending how your function keys are laid out.

Analyzing Light Curves: Calculated with Kepler's 3rd Law

Names: _____

Instructions: The "Transit Light Curves" show the light of 9 different stars and how the light level changes when a planet transits each star. Study the light curves to find the period of the planet. (The period equals year-length for a planet (T), and is the time between transits.) Like Johannes Kepler did, we express the planet's distance (R) in AU (Astronomical Unit = average distance from Earth to the Sun). For stars the same size as the Sun, Kepler's 3rd Law is simply:

$$R^3 = T^2 \quad * \text{ Note: There is actually a constant } K \text{ implied in this equation that sets the units straight:}$$

$$\text{or} \quad R = \sqrt[3]{T^2} \quad R^3 / T^2 = K \text{ where } K = 1 \text{ AU}^3 / \text{Year}^2$$

Orbital Distance from Kepler's 3rd Law			
Planet	Period (T in years)	T^2	Distance = $\sqrt[3]{T^2}$ (in AU)
Kepler 4b			
HAT-P-7b			
HAT-P-11b			
Mystery-b			
Mystery-c			
Tres-2b			
Kepler 5b			
Kepler 6b			
Kepler 7b			
Kepler 8b			

Planet's Size (radius using formula)			
Planet	Brightness Drop of Z (%)	\sqrt{Z}	Radius = $10 \times \sqrt{Z}$ (in Earth radii)
Kepler 4b			
HAT-P-7b			
HAT-P-11b			
Mystery-b			
Mystery-c			
Tres-2b			
Kepler 5b			
Kepler 6b			
Kepler 7b			
Kepler 8b			

CUBE ROOTS

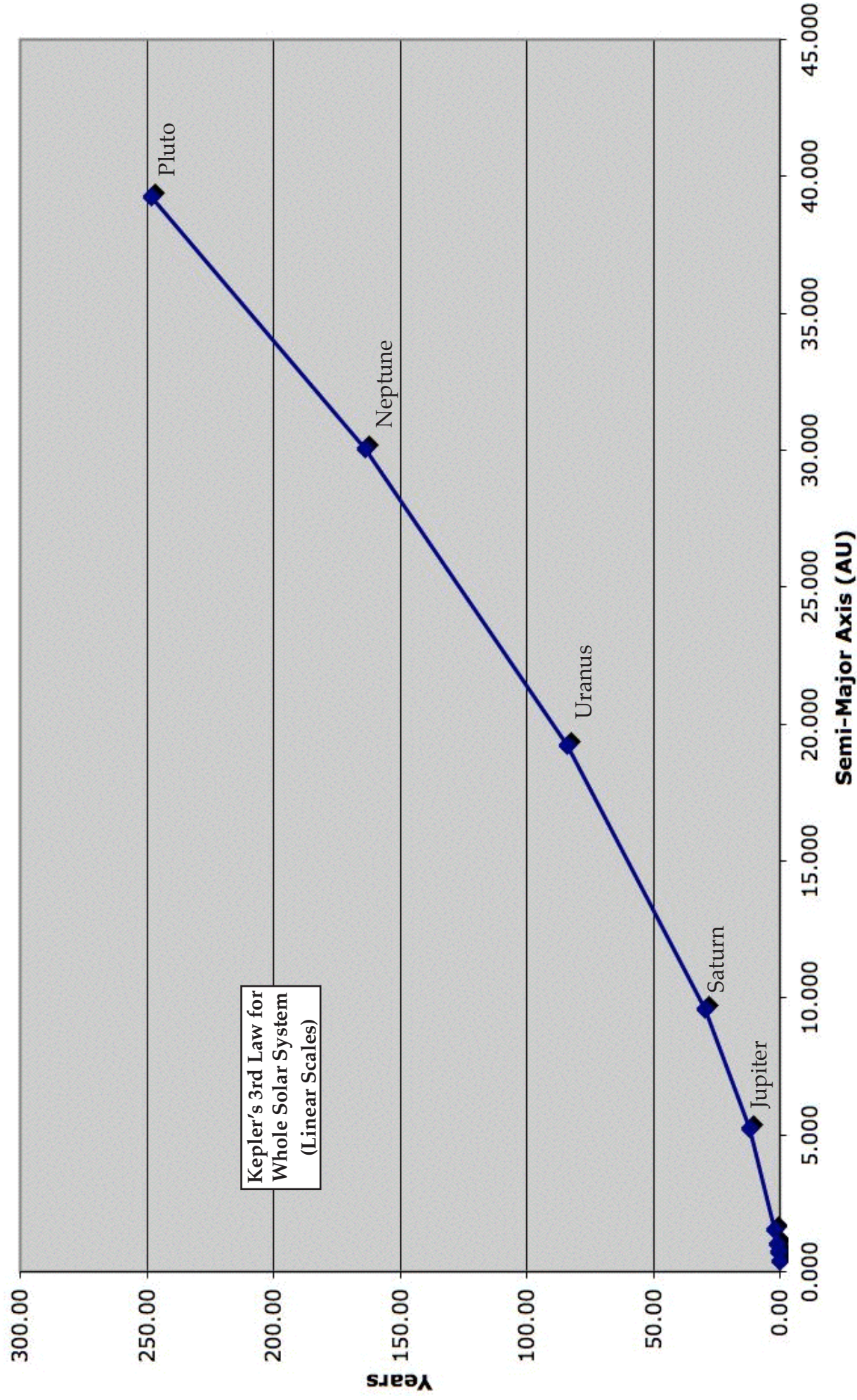
Number	Cube Root	Number	Cube Root	Number	Cube Root
0.0025	0.136	0.09	0.448	0.32	0.684
0.0050	0.171	0.1	0.464	0.34	0.698
0.0075	0.196	0.12	0.493	0.36	0.711
0.0100	0.100	0.14	0.519	0.38	0.724
0.0100	0.215	0.16	0.543	0.4	0.737
0.02	0.271	0.18	0.565	0.5	0.794
0.03	0.311	0.2	0.585	0.6	0.843
0.04	0.342	0.22	0.604	0.7	0.888
0.05	0.368	0.24	0.621	0.8	0.928
0.06	0.391	0.26	0.638	1	1.000
0.07	0.412	0.28	0.654		
0.08	0.431	0.3	0.669		

Questions:

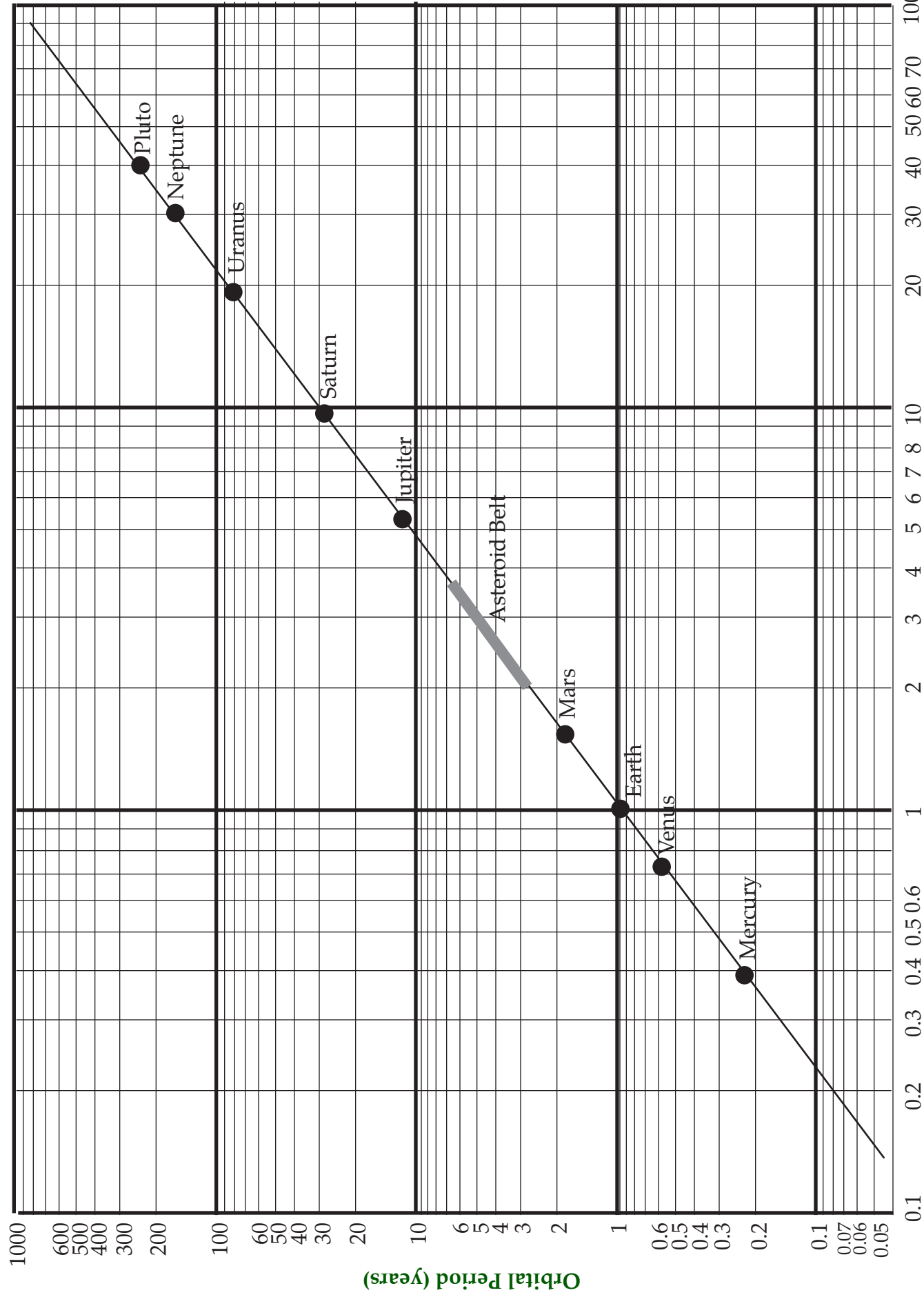
- Which planet(s) are similar in size to Earth?
- Jupiter's radius is about 11 times Earth's radius. Which planets are similar in size to Jupiter?
- Describe the relationship between the period of the planets and their orbital distances.

(Write answers on reverse.)

Kepler's 3rd Law



Keplers's 3rd Law Graph of Whole Solar System with Logarithmic Scales



Orbital Radius (AU) [Semi-major axis]